

1. Title:

Mow Right! Improving IPM adoption in home lawn care via a simple mowing message

2. Project Leaders:

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3. Cooperators:

Cornell Turfgrass Team
Cornell Cooperative Extension Community Horticulture Program Work Team
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4. Abstract:

In NYS 82% of our three million acres of turfgrass are lawns maintained by homeowners. We work with our cooperators to conduct a survey to enhance our understanding of current lawn mowing practices. We collected nearly 1,700 survey responses from lawn owners representing all 62 NYS counties. Well over two thirds of these lawn owners were raising their mower blade to a reasonable height but only less than a half were waiting for their grass to reach over 4 inches and not even one quarter were sharpening their mower blade more than once per season. In response to this information we initiated a simple message campaign with a press release that emphasized the benefits of sharpening your mower blade regularly. To further promote proper mowing practices as the best long-term, low-toxicity solution to weed problems in lawns we recruited more than 30 Cornell Cooperative Extension educators and volunteers to participants in two separate 6 hour workshops that built their confidence and skill in diagnosing lawn care issues and providing recommendations for home owners. Feedback from these workshops was overwhelmingly positive.

5. Background and justification:

There are over three million acres of turfgrass in New York State, and 82% of that area is home lawns maintained by homeowners/residents. Consequently it should come as no surprise that Cornell Cooperative Extension educators report that up to 50% of all home care inquiries their county offices receive are about lawn care; for high volume counties that approaches 800 lawn related questions per year (personal communications from 29 counties to L. Bushway). Mowing is the most common lawn maintenance activity that homeowners perform, and they spend an average of 13.5 hours a month mowing. In 2003, homeowners reported weeds as their number one turfgrass problem and they spent over \$16 million on herbicides. Proper mowing practices are the best long-term, low-toxicity solution to weed problems in lawns, and have no additional cost to the homeowner. Clearly any practices that reduce herbicide use around the home will reduce risks to the environment, children, pets, families, and other non-target organisms. The success of the Scotts' 4-step Annual Lawn Care Program indicates homeowners' appreciation for simple straight-forward messages. For all these reasons, a campaign to promote proper mowing

practices through a simple message will maximize adoption of practices and can be used as a model for promoting other IPM practices with homeowners in the future.

6. Objectives:

Our goal is to increase the adoption of proper mowing on home lawns as an important IPM practice. Our specific objectives are as follows:

Provide an in-service for CCE Community Horticulture Extension Educators on basic lawn care problem solving.

Gather lawn owners' responses to a few simple questions about their current mowing practices and then share and use these findings in program planning and future evaluations.

Carry out a statewide public education campaign through our community horticulture and Master Gardener Volunteer network that is focused on mowing practices that promotes lawn health and IPM practices.

7. Procedures:

We worked with our cooperators to develop a very short survey to enhance our understanding of current lawn mowing practices. In the spring of 2007, copies of the survey were distributed to all CCE Community Horticulture County programs that field consumer questions in their local office. We recruited these counties to ask every homeowner who comes to them with a lawn question, in person or by phone, to complete the survey. In the fall of 2007, we collected all surveys from counties, summarized responses and distribute findings.

Lawn owners responses to our survey led to the creation of this news release: [Save gas, sharpen your mowing practices](#) and encouragement for local cooperative extension county office to use this as part of the statewide simple message campaign Mow Right! Web statistics indicate that this new release page was viewed 665 times.

In conjunction with Cornell's Turf Team and our CCE cooperators, we developed and conducted two one-day in-services that enhanced CCE Community Horticulture Extension Educators' confidence and skills in diagnosing lawn care issues and providing recommendations that employ IPM principles. We recruit 20-25 CCE educators and volunteers to participate in each workshop through the Community Horticulture Program Work Team. A post workshop survey of participants offer feedback on the value of the experience in meeting educators and volunteers needs.

8. Results and discussion:

Lawn care survey results

1663 useable completed surveys.

1) Who usually mows your home lawn?	No. of responses	% of total
I do.	1194	72

Another unpaid person does.	275	17
Another paid person or service does.	189	11
No response	5	<1
2) Which best describes how tall your lawn grows before it is cut?		
4 inches or more.	771	46
Less than 4 inches.	539	32
The lawn is mowed about every week regardless of grass height.	293	18
I don't know.	53	3
No response	7	<1
3) Which best describes the height of your mower blade?		
It is at the highest blade height setting.	430	26
The blade is set to cut the lawn to between 2 and 3 inches.	947	57
The blade is set to cut the lawn to less than 2 inches.	88	5
I do not know.	187	11
No response	7	<1
4) Which best describes how often your lawn mower blade is sharpened?		
More than once a season.	380	23
Once a season.	697	42
Once every 2 to 3 years.	330	20
Never.	176	11
No response	80	5
5) May we contact you in the future to find out more about your approaches to lawn care?		
Yes	826	49
No	837	51
6) What is the New York State County where your lawn is located?		
At least one response from all 60 counties/county units		

Feedback from CCE educators and volunteers participating in the lawn care workshops included:

“I have always had one sided views of lawn (don't like them!). After hearing Marty (Petrovic) explanation of his studies on runoff I was surprised to learn that a properly fertilized lawn will have less phosphorus in runoff than a poorly maintained lawn. As an educator it is a good example of why you should not let your biases effect your recommendations.”

“This lawn care in-service was very valuable to my work as an educator. Not only do I receive a number of lawn care questions each season but I also hold lawn care & watershed awareness seminars. I found the grass Id and grass characteristics very useful because many times people ask about grass types and maintenance but I felt that I was not knowledgeable enough to give a credible answer.”

“It gave me really great information and resources to deal with some of the most asked questions in our county. I feel much more knowledgeable and confident to be able to answer lawn questions now and feel that passing this knowledge on to MGs in our county will help also.”

9. Project location(s):

Survey responses from lawn owners representing all 62 NYS counties were collected.

Educators and volunteers from these counties participated in training sessions: Albany, Broome, Cayuga, Clinton, Columbia, Dutchess, Essex, Genesee, Greene, Ontario, Orleans, Putnam, Rensselaer, Rockland, Schenectady, Seneca, Steuben, Suffolk, Tioga, Tompkins, Warren, Westchester and Wyoming.

10. Samples of resources developed:

CCE educators and volunteers participating in lawn care workshops



News release: [Save gas, sharpen your mowing practices](#)